



# WILDERNESS AT THE DOORSTEP

## *People and Bears Between Paw Paw and Hancock*

by **BARRY D. WOOD**

In the early 1900s Theodore Roosevelt and his friend John Muir liked to say that wilderness saves the human spirit. That being the case, we in Washington, D.C. are lucky to have wilderness so close at hand.

I arrived in Hancock, MD where I-70 veers north into PA at 2:30 on a Friday afternoon. Leaving the car in the town lot adjacent to the C & O Canal (\$5 per day, M-Sa), within 30 minutes I was on the Western Maryland rail trail and immersed in a different world.

My destination was Bill's Place in Little Orleans, 15 miles towards Cumberland. For three quarters of that distance the riding is easy as the Rails to Trails Conservancy put down a smooth black top surface where rail tracks once were. The last few miles on the towpath were also easy as there hadn't been rain for several days.

Bill's Place is well known to aficionados of this remotest section of the towpath between Cumberland and Georgetown. That may be because it is the *only* place for food and drink for the 31 miles between Paw Paw tunnel and Hancock. Bill passed away four years ago but his son Jack carries on. Several times during my three-day ride I heard passing riders yell back that they were headed to Bill's for burgers and beer.

Not intending to ride on in darkness, Jack had put me in touch with 80-year-old Steve Hubner, the crusty retired postmaster who runs the Little Orleans Lodge 200 yards from Bill's.

Like Jack, Steve is a piece of work, and in a positive way. The price was right (\$50) and Steve is a generous host. In the morning he was up at 6 to prepare French toast, scrapple (pork scraps), sausage and bacon. Steve is a birdman and the morning visitors to his feeders were cardinals, titmice, chickadees, nuthatches and sparrows.

The Potomac from lookout peak





The western (Cumberland) end of Paw Paw tunnel...



and the eastern entrance.

There is fog most mornings this time of year and Saturday was no exception, meaning there was no point in departing until it had burned off. Strolling down the hill the scene was pure country, a big change from the city I had left behind not even 24-hours earlier.

I had learned much from Steve about the evolving misfortunes of this rural area. Decent railroad jobs in Hancock were gone, the once plentiful apple orchards were gone, leaving only recreation and bicycle touring as sources of revenue. Villages and towns along the Potomac in both Maryland and West Virginia are hollowed out, young people gone to the cities with those left behind largely dependent on public assistance.

Steve wanted me to see the Potomac from lookout peak and the stunning view made the short uphill drive worthwhile. When we arrived the valley was shrouded in fog but ten minutes later the gentle turns of the great river were on display.

The two and a half-hour ride to Paw Paw was idyllic, perfect weather and a warming sun that by noon

made a jacket unnecessary. It was a serene world of singing birds and large and small turtles taking the sun atop the logs that litter the canal. Wary of intruders as I approached, one by one the turtles plopped into water that had been a green slime so smooth and thick it looked like a floor to be walked on.

Occasionally I encountered hikers and other riders. Some were headed to or from Pittsburgh and those traveling east reported they had left Cumberland in the morning.

The Paw Paw tunnel is the area's main attraction. While an impressive engineering feat for the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is also a monument to folly. It took 12 years to build and bankrupted its builder and the canal company and is why the canal stopped at Cumberland far short of its intended terminus. When the nearly mile-long tunnel finally opened in 1850 canals had lost out to the competing railroads. Canal advocates pressed on saying that train engines were not powerful enough to haul large quantities of freight.

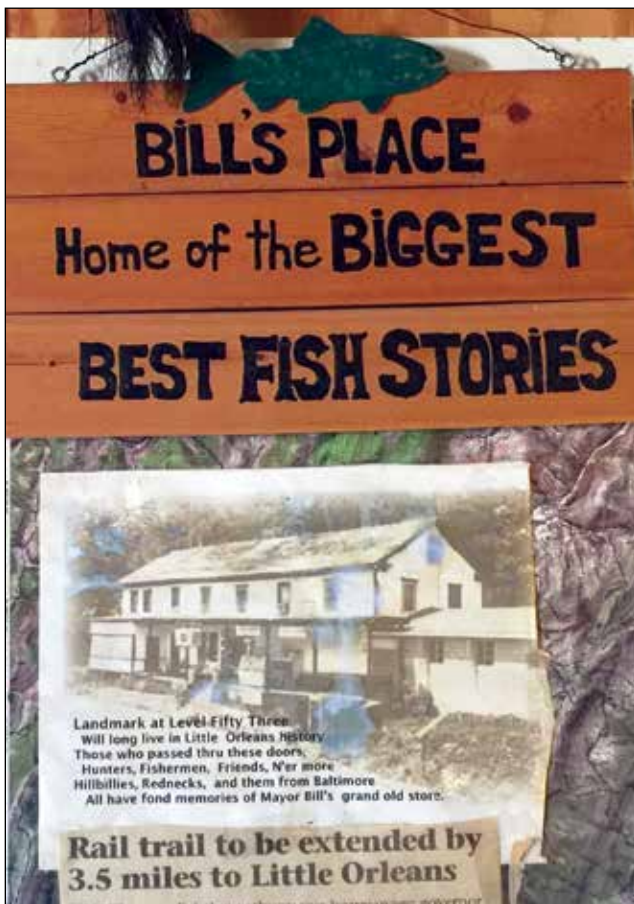
And indeed there were a few years in which the canal company actually made a profit hauling coal, grain, apples and wood to Georgetown.

The tunnel is narrow, dark and long. No wonder there were fist fights as boats jostled to go first. Today cyclists have to walk their bikes and need a light to make their way through.

For me the figurative light at the end of the tunnel was the Wrenwood Inn just across the Potomac in West Virginia. I don't think its proprietor Carol would be offended if I call her a long-time refugee from Bethesda. She operates an elegant B&B, well worth the \$85 for a room with breakfast. She also offers dinner and on Saturday night that featured an artist from the Bay Area and 63-year-old Jim telling his story of riding from Pittsburgh to DC and back.

There's almost nothing else in Paw Paw, which like Hancock has seen its economic fortunes slip away. Coal trains and Amtrak's Capitol Limited roar past

Bill's Place



Jack



Jim packing up for the ride to Cumberland and Pittsburgh





Farm between Bill's and Little Orleans Lodge

Paw Paw but don't even slow down. Evidence of decline is the boarded up fruit company warehouse that used to be the village's principal business. Carol, who relies on cyclists for her livelihood, tells me that until the Dollar General opened a decade ago, residents drove 45-minutes for groceries.

The surprise came during my 4½-hour ride Sunday back to Hancock. A couple miles short of Bill's Place in the middle of nowhere there was a rustle of brush from near the river. Just then 30 yards or so ahead a large black bear emerged onto the trail. It paused briefly while I slowed to a halt and then took off running at high speed along the towpath in the opposite direction. He is the black speck in the distance in the first photograph.

Startled but not shaken, I asked Jack at Bill's Place how fast a bear can run. He said well over 30 mph for short distances. Jack had just come from the river fishing for bass. He said his grandson thought he had spotted a bear on the shore.

A thru rider at Bill's Place



Arriving at Hancock at 3 p.m. I found my car and did the Clark Kent change out of riding gear and headed for Weaver's restaurant where the homemade apple pie is as good as always even though the acclaimed restaurant has new owners.

In short what a tonic for the soul was a 48-hour journey into wilderness that is so close to the nation's capital.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Cannondale hybrid rider Barry D. Wood, @econbarry, is a broadcaster and writer on the global economy, based in Washington. His just published book, *Exploring New Europe: A Bicycle Journey*, an account of his 2,500-mile ride from Estonia to Albania, is available on Amazon.

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- Participating cyclists will also receive event-themed items.
- Money raised will go to four different organizations that focus on the environment:

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American Chestnut Land Trust	Port Tobacco River Conservancy
Prince George's County	St. Mary's County
Alice Ferguson Foundation	St. Mary's River Watershed Association

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Time: Packet pick-up/same-day registration, from 7 to 9 a.m.

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Cost: Register\* by May 3: \$40  
May 4–May 26: \$50  
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